

# **Dreams and Realities:** Developing Countries and the English Language

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Paper 8

English language in Africa: An impediment or a contributor to development?

by Nigussie Negash

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## Introduction

The African continent is a vast region with a huge resource, both material and human (cultural and linguistic). However, it is one of the neglected regions in the world. Even in the field of English language teaching (ELT) we do not hear about as much activity in Africa as we do in other regions of the world. David Graddol, whose influential books address diverse ELT contexts (Graddol 1997, 2006), says almost nothing on English in Africa. So it is high time that voices from the region are heard.

This paper takes an African (insider) look at the role of English in development in Africa. My inspiration to grapple with the topic comes from attending conferences dealing with language policy, language and development, and reading sources in the area (Graddol 1997, 2006, Coleman 2010). Another source of inspiration is the experience of working as a British Council and Hornby School teacher trainer in East Africa and West Africa, which are geographically far apart but struggling with similar issues concerning the role of English and indigenous languages. Similar to Coleman (2010), my chapter deals with English in development but focuses on Africa's complex political, social and linguistic context.

There is insufficient space in this chapter to delve into too much detail concerning development. However, it is clear that there has been a movement among development thinkers away from the conventional conception of development simply as economic growth, meaning a sustainable process that expands the quantity and variety of goods and services that people use to satisfy their material wants. Instead, development is seen now as 'a process enlarging people's choices' (UNDP 1990:1).

From this perspective, African countries, which are traditionally associated with war, famine and poverty, seem to have made some progress (Mwabu and Fosu 2010, quoted by UNDP 2010a). A press release from UNDP (UNDP 2010b) states that 'most developing nations made dramatic, yet often underestimated, progress in health,

education and basic living standards in recent years.' UNDP actually ranks Ethiopia 11th out of 135 countries in terms of improvement in its relative position in the Human Development Index (HDI) between 1970 and 2010.

Among other things, Africa's economic and political interconnectedness both within the continent and beyond it to other parts of the world has contributed to these achievements. Africans have begun to engage more openly and critically. There are some initial talks to unite African states into one strong entity like the European Union or the United States of America. There are economic and political forums at the sub-regional level such as IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development, with seven member states), ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States, with 15 members), COMESA (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, with 19 members) and more recently NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development, a forum which African leaders have established to provide a peer review mechanism). Africans are beginning to negotiate with one voice on trade and development issues, for example at the Copenhagen Climate Conference, in which African governments appointed a team led by the Ethiopian Prime Minister as the chief negotiator.

As an official language of the African Union (AU) and an international language, English is important for the continent. The question then is what concrete roles does English have in development in Africa? Is it a detractor or a contributor to Africa's development endeavours?

Coleman (2010) addresses a similar question by reviewing the functions of English in development. He identifies four areas where English has often been given a role to play:

- for employability
- for international mobility
- for unlocking development opportunities and accessing information
- as an impartial language.

In this chapter, I have adopted a more or less similar categorisation to help me to analyse the role played by English in African development, but I have made several modifications to Coleman's categories.

Because of its association with colonialism, English is often stigmatised as the language of imperialism or oppression (Phillipson 1992). Many writers on language policy (e.g. Ouane and Glanz 2010) lament that the emphasis on foreign languages like English (Graddol 2006, Batibo 2007) has led to Africa making an insignificant contribution to knowledge production and creative writing because this has led to a dependency syndrome among educated people. However, it is not rational to blame every ailment in Africa (political, economic, educational) on these foreign languages. After all, as Phillipson (1996) observes, after independence it was African leaders, such as those in Nigeria, who were responsible for the choice of

English over local languages. This was done with the intention ‘to de-emphasise ethnicity and build up a sense of nationhood’ (Phillipson 1996:162).

In spite of their historical association with colonial rule and the fact that they have limited the development of indigenous languages, the former colonial languages are useful now in several ways. As an African, I will try to answer the question as to whether English is helping or hindering development. This is a complex issue that does not have a straightforward answer, so I will look at the challenging co-existence of English with other indigenous languages and foreign languages. I will also try to comment on some recent challenges presented by China’s desire to dominate economic activities in Africa.

## **Arrival of English in Africa**

The continent of Africa has a population of about 460 million who speak more than 2,000 languages (Lodhi 1993). English was introduced to Africa with the arrival of Europeans as slave traders and colonisers. Despite the departure of Europeans after independence, English has remained in the continent and today it is used as one of the official or working languages in the AU. It is used for different communicative purposes in 52 African countries (possibly 53 when Southern Sudan becomes independent), depending on the language and education policy of each country. Of these, six countries are listed by Graddol (1997:10) as territories where English is used as the L1 but where there is greater L2 use or significant use of another language. About 20 sub-Saharan countries, usually known as Anglophone, use English as an official language exclusively (for example Ghana, Nigeria, Namibia and Zambia) or with another African language (Kenya, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe). In the Lusophone (Portuguese speaking) and Francophone (French speaking) countries and in Ethiopia – none of which were British colonies – the status of English is also very high. In Ethiopia, for example, English was introduced in the 1940s as a language of science and education and to facilitate knowledge and technology transfer from the developed West (Haile-Michael 1993, Bogale 2009, Negash 2005).

## **Roles of English in Africa’s development**

English is a major international language with multiple functions and roles for Africans within Africa and in interaction with the people of other continents. It plays a critical role in entertainment and the media, in diplomacy, in commerce and tourism, in migration and in education. In fulfilling these roles, English creates development opportunities for individuals and communities in Africa. We will look at each of these aspects individually below.

### **English in entertainment and media**

One of the areas where English is most accessible in Africa is probably entertainment and the media. Video films produced in Hollywood have inundated African urban areas. Football is another popular social event to which Africans have access through English, the English Premier League being the most famous programme. Television has played a significant role in captivating Africans’ attention. Despite some countries’ unwillingness to privatise their state-owned

television companies (Shinn 2008) or expand the range of their broadcasts, many international news and entertainment programmes are available for free or fee through private satellite dishes.

During the Cold War many African countries were aligned with either the West or the Soviet Union; the citizens of countries in the Communist bloc were denied access to information from inside or outside. As relatively more liberal regimes have come to power, the use of English in the print media has grown rapidly in Africa.

In Ethiopia, print media appeared for the first time in the period of Emperor Menelik. For example, *Aimero* was published in Amharic between 1902 and 1903 and *Le Semeur d’Ethiopie* in French from 1905 to 1911 (Bekele 2003:14). Television and radio broadcasts – in Amharic – began during the rule of Haile-Selassie. By the 1990s English was still rarely used in the media: there was only one official newspaper, *The Ethiopian Herald*, one television programme and one radio broadcast in English (which was limited to one hour per day). Today, radio broadcasts have still not changed much, apart from FM stations transmitting music in English. But we now have far more English language newspapers than ever before. The total number of newspapers has increased dramatically from three to more than 15. They are published in Amharic, other indigenous languages and English, despite having a somewhat uneasy relationship with the government. A simple internet search generates the list of current print and online English newspapers and magazines shown in Box 1. Some of these publications are pro-government, others are independent.

Box 1: English language media in Ethiopia (World-Newspapers 2010)	
<b>Addis Fortune:</b> Quality business newspaper	<b>Ethiopian Reporter:</b> Daily newspaper based in Addis Ababa
<b>Addis Tribune:</b> Private weekly newspaper from the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa	<b>Ethiopian Review:</b> News site publishing wide range of dissident views
<b>allAfrica.com:</b> Ethiopia: Daily news articles related to Ethiopia from African sources	<b>Helm:</b> Ethiopian fashion and entertainment magazine
<b>BBC Country Profile:</b> Ethiopia: Features country overview, news, key facts and events, timelines and leader profile	<b>Jimma Times:</b> Independent online newspaper run by reporters both in Ethiopia and the Ethiopian diaspora
<b>Capital:</b> Newspaper striving to promote free enterprise in Ethiopia and inform the public at large about economic events	<b>Nazret.com:</b> US-based news portal with headlines from various sources
<b>Ethiopian Commentator:</b> Opinion-based online magazine	<b>Tadias:</b> Lifestyle and business publication devoted exclusively to the Ethiopian–American community
<b>Ethiopian Observer:</b> Provides news and commentaries regarding current issues on Ethiopia	<b>Walta Information Centre:</b> Government-affiliated site providing daily news in Amharic and English from all regions

Furthermore, in public libraries we can now find foreign magazines such as *The Economist*, *Newsweek*, *Focus on Africa*, *NewAfrica* and so on.

Internet-based communication has also grown rapidly over recent years, thanks to the expansion of IT facilities. In the past, people in some parts of Africa had difficulty accessing newspapers published in the West because they were banned, due to ideological differences during the Cold War. Now anyone can access online international news outlets, including the BBC and CNN. Despite the relatively small number of citizens who are literate in English, it is amazing to observe the eagerness of many – especially young people – to chat in English. Several websites are available (including BBC opinion columns) where Africans can debate politics, economics and so on.

### **English as the language of diplomacy**

African countries use English as one of the major working languages at AU meetings, seminars and conferences. The leaders, policy makers and experts meet in different cities in Africa to debate multifaceted issues, mostly using English. For instance, AU parliamentary meetings are often conducted in English with parallel translations into other international working languages such as Arabic, French or Portuguese. Similar to the way that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) works, African leaders come together to debate development issues (such as climate negotiations) using English. In October 2007 I attended an African Parliamentary meeting in Addis Ababa which was chaired by Ethiopia; the language of discussion was English. Agendas for AU meetings are also prepared in English; for an example, see [www.africa-union.org/root/au/Conferences/Past/2006/July/summit/summit.htm](http://www.africa-union.org/root/au/Conferences/Past/2006/July/summit/summit.htm)

University professors who participated in the 5th International Conference on Federalism, held in Ethiopia in December 2010, reported that – although participants came from many countries where languages other than English are spoken – all the sessions were conducted in English. (See, for example, the opening speech by the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, at [www.waltainfo.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=24625&Itemid=52](http://www.waltainfo.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=24625&Itemid=52).)

### **English for commerce and tourism**

Though it is not well developed and its potential has not been fully exploited, tourism is an attractive sector for Africa's development. In its own ways, Africa's tourism industry has already grown significantly:

*Africa attracted just about four per cent of total international tourists and received two per cent of international tourist expenditure ... in 2001. However, tourist arrivals in Africa increased from 15 million in 1990 to 29.1 million in 2002. (Naudé and Saayman 2005:367)*

Today, African countries formerly known for civil war, such as Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Ethiopia, are growing to be tourist destinations. As the tourism sector continues to expand, which it definitely will, there will be many African industries, airlines, hotels, handicraft manufacturers, tour operators and travel agencies that will reap dividends. This sector creates job opportunities for many people, even for the low-skilled ones. However, its success in packaging and

selling of products and services for tourists depends on competence in one of the international languages. English is an important tool of communication between Africans and visitors from all parts of the globe. The importance of English will therefore increase as African countries gear up to attract the growing tourist numbers from Asia (especially from China). For example, a report from the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (English Xinhua.net 2010) indicates that in 2009 alone about 381,000 Chinese tourists travelled to Africa and about the same number of Africans (401,000) visited China.

The demand for English does not arise from language policy only. It arises also from outward-looking economic development strategies; for example, through attracting foreign investors and tourists or selling products abroad. To bring their citizens out of poverty, African governments encourage their citizens to produce goods and crops for foreign markets. Navuri (2010) gives the example of Tanzanian farmers being challenged to produce cotton to export to the hungry textile industries of Turkey. The cash crops which Africans export include coffee from Ethiopia and Kenya, cotton and sugar from West and Central Africa and cocoa from West Africa. These are produced by a mix of large- and small-scale farming operations (mainly the latter).

Since the world economy has become more and more interdependent, price fluctuations and subsidies by the West have had an immediate impact on the wellbeing of poor farmers (who constitute the majority of producers and are the backbone of the economy in many countries). For example, Gumisai Mutume reported for *Africa Recovery* magazine in 2003 that the price of cotton had plunged because of the billions of dollars that the EU and the US was spending on subsidising their local farmers (Mutume 2003). Similarly, in the coffee market, the farmers who have laboured for so many years remain poor, earning less than USD0.25 (GBP0.16, ETB4.11) per kilo for their export standard coffee which is then sold for at least USD12 (GBP8, ETB197) in the USA:

*... [We must be aware of] the pain that Western subsidies cause poor African farmers. One of the main criticisms against agricultural subsidies is that they work directly against efforts by donor nations, including the US, to combat poverty in developing countries. An estimated 96 per cent of the world's farmers live in developing countries, with some 2.5 billion people depending on agriculture for a livelihood. Many seek an opportunity to trade their way out of poverty through a fair trading system. But over the years, unfavourable trade terms have been a major factor in the erosion of the market share of poor nations. According to the WTO, the share of developing countries in world agricultural exports fell from 40 per cent in 1961 to 35 per cent last year. (Mutume 2003:4)*

The security of millions of African farmers depends on the negotiation and marketing skills – including their command of English – possessed by the leaders and exporters who represent them. The extent to which developing country representatives possess these skills determines the effectiveness or otherwise of their participation in multilateral and bilateral negotiations, such as the 2006–2008 dispute between Ethiopia and the American company Starbucks regarding the branding of Ethiopian speciality coffees in the States. A biodiversity academic who

has participated in many negotiations and conferences in Africa, Europe and Asia expressed the importance of English as follows:

*We feel the importance of English when we participate in international negotiations that involve people from Africa and other regions. Usually the ones from English-speaking countries express their ideas very clearly and dominate debates. I remember one negotiation event in Nagoya, Japan, on biodiversity. We spent an unnecessarily long time on understanding the word 'eminent'. In our debriefing after the event, we talked about lack of mastery of English as the main challenge. We concluded that our children should learn English properly for us to make our contributions and take our rights. (Interview/DM/December 2010)*

But Africans do not trade or negotiate only with the West. Asian markets, such as China, India, Japan and Thailand, are becoming the major trading partners for Africans. An official report from China put the value of trade between Africa and China in 2010 at USD114.81 billion (GBP74.38 billion, ETB1,886 billion), a 43.5 per cent increase on the previous year. Furthermore, China's exports to Africa:

*... from the 1980s to the 1990s were mainly light industrial products, food chemical products, native produce, animal by-products. Since 2000 the export of machinery, automobiles and electronic products has been dramatically increasing, with product quality and technology markedly improved. (English Xinhua.net 2010)*

The report adds further that Africa–China economic relations also involve direct investment. That is to say, the Chinese government provides financial support for Chinese enterprises to expand their investment to Africa. The Chinese government has signed investment agreements with 33 African countries:

*So far 13 companies have moved in; they engage in mining, prospecting, non-ferrous metal processing, chemical engineering and construction. (English Xinhua.net 2010)*

Many Chinese people come to Africa as investors and as employees in various industries. Experts have different estimates for the size of the Chinese workforce in Africa, but *Xinhua*, China's official newspaper, put the figure at 750,000 in 2008 (Poltzer 2008).

Traditionally, Africans used to export primary products such as cotton and phosphate to China. Of late, these have diversified to include steel, copper, chemical fertilisers and electronic items manufactured in Africa, as well as agricultural products like oranges, wine, cocoa beans, coffee, olive oil and sesame. The official report referred to above (English Xinhua.net 2010) also indicates that Africa–China trade is more or less evenly balanced, probably due to China lifting the tariff of almost 95 per cent which used to apply on African products.

To effectively manage such a huge and growing economy the main language which Asian and African businessmen, investors, experts and leaders have in common is English. This is likely to continue to be the case for the foreseeable future.

## English and African migration

Migration is not a new phenomenon for Africa. Africa has perhaps been the region of the world which has been most affected by migration, both negatively and positively. The phenomenon of African migration has various forms and causes, including forced migration due to conflicts arising from ideological differences, economic migration due to poor working conditions and remuneration, and legal migration for study purposes. There is a commonly held belief that people migrate only from developing to developed countries. In fact, the largest numbers of migrants are found in internal displacement (within the same country) caused by wars or disasters and in 'low HDI to low HDI' migration between neighbouring countries (UNDP 2009). That means internal and intraregional movements far outnumber migration from the developing to the developed world.

Another important aspect of African migration is the movement of skilled workers and professionals from their home countries to other African countries, the West (Europe and North America) and Asia. Traditionally, Europe and North America have been the major destinations for skilled and professional African migrants. In 2005 the BBC (BBC 2005) carried a story from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) on Africans' success in the UK which noted that 'African-born immigrants are doing better than many other migrants.' The IPPR report stated that the employment rate of South Africans in the UK was 81 per cent, Zimbabweans 73 per cent and Nigerians 61 per cent but only 12 per cent of skilled Somalis were in employment. Although we cannot be sure whether the same situation applies today following the economic crisis, we can deduce from these figures that English language competence almost certainly plays an important part in African professionals' ability to find employment in the UK.

Figures are hard to come by, but Australia, the Middle East and Asian countries such as Japan, China and India have also become destinations for African professionals. Former US ambassador David Shinn estimates that about 300,000 African professionals work and live outside Africa, making it a continent which is losing 20,000 of its highly trained persons annually (Shinn 2008). The medical profession has been the most active in seeking employment abroad. Parker (2009) notes that there has been a huge influx of African doctors into Canada; the main reason for this being the big gap in remuneration. For instance:

*Physicians in developing African countries like Ghana and Nigeria are estimated to earn between CAD3,600 [GBP2,300, USD3,600] and CAD12,000 [GBP7,700, USD12,000] per year, which is in stark contrast to the average physician salaries of CAD162,000 [GBP105,000, USD161,000] in developed countries such as Canada. (Parker 2009:22)*

Parker also identifies other cases of professional migration, including the case of Ethiopian Airlines losing 150 of its most highly skilled personnel in 2007 to other higher paying Gulf Airlines.

Shinn (2008) observes that African skilled worker migration takes place not only to the West but within Africa as well, from poor and politically unstable parts to the relatively peaceful and prosperous countries. Surprisingly, African countries pay USD4 billion (GBP2.6 billion) annually to employ expatriate professionals.

Migration (albeit temporary) for study purposes is also a significant phenomenon. A Hong Kong-based newspaper reports that:

*In 2001, there were 1,224 African students in China; by 2010, it is hoped that scholarship and sponsored students alone will be about 4,000 and total numbers may well exceed 12,000, many of them in private and/or independent institutions. (Simons 2009)*

African migration has been associated with many negative phenomena. In the developed countries, it puts pressure on resources and consequently has become a serious political issue. In Africa, on the other hand, it is an issue of a 'brain drain', a serious loss of the most highly skilled and best qualified people that African nations possess. These issues, however, are rarely seen from the perspective of the individuals involved or the migrants' contribution to development. As the former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, put it:

*We cannot ignore the real policy difficulties posed by migration ... But neither should we lose sight of its immense potential to benefit migrants, the countries they leave and those to which they migrate. (Cited in Mutume 2006:15)*

Mutume (2006) laments the irony that the developed countries create a conducive environment for the flow of goods and services but they restrict the flow of labour from developing countries. Increasingly, however, professional and other forms of labour migration are being interpreted in terms of 'human development' (UNDP 2009), as creating opportunities for individuals and adding value to both the host and sending nations.

The most conspicuous way in which this can be seen is that migrants send remittances home. Several African countries have benefited in this way. For instance, a World Bank report (World Bank 2010) has estimated that worldwide migration remittances to developing countries, including Africa, totalled USD336 billion (GBP218 billion) in 2008 and USD316 (GBP205 billion) in 2009. These sums exceed direct capital flows to developing countries through private investment and donations. They account for 1.9 per cent of GDP for all developing countries and 5.9 per cent for the lowest income countries (which include most of the African nations). In spite of the high cost of transferring remittances (in some cases as much as 25 per cent), a report from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) indicates that:

*More than 30 million Africans live outside their countries of origin, sending more than USD40 billion [GBP26 billion] to their families and communities back home every year. (IFAD 2009)*

The money remitted has a particularly important impact on rural communities, where it may be used for a range of different purposes. According to UNDP (2009:7):

*Moving generally brings benefits, most directly in the form of remittances sent to immediate family members. However, the benefits are also spread more broadly as remittances are spent – thereby generating jobs for local workers – and as behaviour changes in response to ideas from abroad. Women, in particular, may*

*be liberated from traditional roles. The nature and extent of these impacts depend on who moves, how they fare abroad and whether they stay connected to their roots through flows of money, knowledge and ideas.*

I have interviewed a number of people who have travelled outside Africa to find out about their experiences of using English.

Mr Samabat (not his real name) is a male taxi driver who has lived in Washington DC in the USA for 15 years. He said:

*Life in US is difficult and easy but for some time I had difficulty because I didn't understand English very well, I didn't pay much attention to English in school: So I suffered. I think I have had enough now, I want to come back and establish some business. (Translated from Amharic)*

Ms Firewinta is a female who spent five years in Dubai and Qatar as a domestic servant. She said:

*To communicate with my employers was very difficult. One of the problems was language. I only learnt a few Arabic words before leaving my country. So my only option was to talk to them in English. Although I didn't understand them well, they also spoke to me in English. Slowly I increased my Arabic. The employers want to talk to me in Arabic always but still there is difficulty.*

Ms Abebasori is a female who lived in the UK for two years, working as a cleaner in a hospital. She said:

*When I first arrived I was afraid because in my country I only met foreigners as a secretary but they speak clear English. But in the hospital people from UK but also other countries, it was difficult to understand their accent.*

Finally, Mr Nega Alem, a male academic who wanted to pay a short visit to Cairo in Egypt, had this to say:

*I was coming back from Europe and I wanted to visit an Egyptian friend in Cairo for some three days. When I was trying to get through security I had a problem. The security officers processed the other European tourists but they refused to allow me in. I heard them using English with the others, but when I tried to talk to them in English they were speaking in Arabic which I didn't understand completely. I was kept in the airport for long hours and travelled to my country when the plane arrived.*

The above extracts are real-life instances of Africans encountering English in English-speaking countries and elsewhere. The examples illustrate how much these people needed English for everyday survival and yet, at the same time, how one can be subject to indifference for using English in certain contexts. Living in a foreign country presents many challenges and not knowing the language makes things even more complicated: the individual is disempowered and may be unable to understand what is happening. But still English as an international language is usually available to facilitate interaction between Africans and people with other cultures and languages.

Recently, there have been some creative new projects established by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) which encourage professional migrants to return to their home countries for the short or long term to support development in different sectors. These returnees are also becoming major investors by setting up new businesses, especially hotels and agricultural industries.

Some African countries, such as Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Ghana and Ethiopia, have established their own mechanisms to encourage their diaspora to return long term or short term to provide professional assistance or to invest in their countries. Although these programmes still have a long way to go there are some encouraging results.

The BBC has also reported on a trend which has been observed in nine African countries 'from Mali to South Africa, from Ghana to Ethiopia' for Africans to return to their home countries after working or studying abroad, either for patriotic reasons or because of 'the growing opportunities back home' (BBC 2010). The report shows how committed professionals can make a significant contribution to their home country by using the knowledge, skills and experience they gained through employment, research and education in developed countries. A case in point is that of Ms Elleni Gebre-Medhin, a US-educated Ethiopian who spearheaded the establishment of the Ethiopian Commodity Exchange and which, in 2010, she was still leading. However, another aspect of this phenomenon, the BBC report indicates, is that even without physically dislocating from their host country the African diaspora are transferring their expertise to their countries and the region as a whole 'helping universities, schools or individuals ... to bridge the skills gap with the West' (BBC 2010).

We can see, therefore, that English language competence is important in all of these aspects. Professionals need to know English both to gain new experience in their host countries and to transfer their knowledge and skills back to their home countries.

There is yet another dimension to work-related migration. Africa is not only sending its citizens abroad; it is also increasingly becoming an attractive destination for global investment companies and professional migrants from other continents (predominantly from China, as we noted above). People from countries in Asia and Europe are beginning to arrive in Africa looking for jobs. The current job creators include the construction, oil, mining, and horticulture industries, international organisations and non-government organisations.

### **Language policies and English in education**

The most important contribution which English has made in Africa is in education. However, this contribution has been challenged because of the limiting effect which it has had historically on the use of the indigenous languages, especially in primary education (Batibo 2007). Many writers (for example, Clegg 2007 and Williams 2011, Chapter 3 this volume) argue strongly for adopting the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, especially in early childhood education, because it facilitates cognitive, communicative and social skills development. Indeed, Ouane and Glanz

(2010) go so far as to observe that 'Africa is the only continent where the majority of children start school using a foreign language'. Language policy analysts hold the view that the lack of development in Africa is associated with failure to exploit the potential of indigenous languages. Despite their independence from colonial rule, African states have failed to come up with effective language policies:

*The most challenging realities that most of these states had to grapple with were the prevailing multilingual and multiethnic phenomena. Most of them took a shortcut by adopting an exoglossic language policy, in which the ex-colonial language was adopted as official language and, in some cases, served also as national language. (Batibo 2007:15)*

More recently, African states – as well as the regional organisation AU – have tried to recognise the indigenous languages as official languages (Chimhundu 2002) and they have formulated laws and policies that encourage the use of L1 as medium of instruction at least up to the primary level. Good examples are South Africa and Ethiopia, which have adopted constitutions that stipulate that all languages should be accorded equal esteem. In South Africa, eleven languages, including the previously marginalised ones, are now recognised as official languages (Fisseha 2009). The provincial governments can select any of these languages for administrative functions, based on 'usage, practicality, expense, regional circumstances and the balances of the needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in the province concerned' (Fisseha 2009:130). A similar approach is taken in Ethiopia. Contrary to the unification agenda of the previous rulers which promoted just one local language, Amharic (Bogale 2009, Haile-Michael 1993, Negash 2005), the current regime has promulgated a constitution that guarantees the equality of all languages and their use:

*Every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture and to preserve its history. (FDRE 1994, Article 39(2), 96)*

Although there is some variation at the lower levels, English is used as a medium of instruction in many African countries, from primary school up to the tertiary level. In the former French colonies of Ivory Coast, Mali and Sénégal, English is the first compulsory foreign language taught in secondary schools. In most cases there is a desire to expand the teaching of English to the primary level as well (Apia 2010, Tennant and Negash 2010).

Research indicates that adopting the first language is not a straightforward thing. Due to the many indigenous languages competing for dominance, national and local governments face difficulty deciding which language to make an official one or a language of education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Cohen's (2007) research in Ethiopia sheds some light on the local linguistic conflicts that come with political moves to empower local languages.

A very good instance of the challenge which Africans encounter concerning the transition from English to the mother tongue as a medium of instruction can be found in the work of Bogale (2009) in Ethiopia. In Ethiopia the transition from mother tongue to English as medium of instruction starts from Grade 5 in one

region, Grade 7 in another region and Grade 9 in yet another. There is even disparity between private and public (government) schools. The private schools, usually located in urban areas, attract the children of well-to-do families, teach English as a subject and use it as the medium of instruction beginning at the kindergarten level. On the other hand, the government schools follow the national policy.

This experience is similar to that of other African countries (for example, Kenya). Despite governments seeking to enforce the national policy in the private schools, parents seem to resist because they believe that they can give their children better opportunities, educationally and economically, than are experienced by those who are taught in their mother tongue. Very often, arguments for using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction do not seem to have answers for all questions. A Ugandan academic, lecturing in the postgraduate programme in Urban Management in a university in Addis Ababa, described the situation in his home country, as follows:

*In the past the use of vernacular was discouraged in schools, children who did that were stigmatised. However, now it is better because these languages are used for primary-level education. But the lingering problem is young people who have not enough competence in English feel discriminated against in the workplace. English is a compulsory language to get jobs, even in government offices, and it is a compulsory subject one should pass to join university.*

**(Interview/TG/December 2010)**

This interview extract clearly reflects the challenges involved in using English alongside the local languages. As the Ugandan academic reflected, many job vacancies in government and non-government organisations require competence in English.

The issue from the parents' side is that they feel that they are in a better position to know what is suitable for their children, and to safeguard their children's rights, rather than the government. Further evidence concerning the perceived value of English in Africa is that many parents (even the policy makers themselves) send their children to English medium schools in their home countries or in the UK, US and Canada, if they have the financial resources to enable them to do so. I interviewed some Ethiopian parents about the idea of educating their children in private English medium schools. Here is what one educated parent said:

*Since there is still confusion, no conclusive evidence at what age a foreign language should be taught, I just followed what the public does. But I think English creates future opportunity for my child.*

**(Interview with LLSN, a law lecturer)**

We should be aware, also, that simply using the mother tongue is not a panacea for all of Africa's education and development problems (Williams 2011).

Since students in ESL and EFL contexts face difficulties in communicating effectively, some education experts (Stoddart 1986, Tekeste 1990) have argued that foreign languages such as English should be replaced by local languages since it is easier for students to acquire them. There have been attempts to do this in

Ethiopia, for example the Amharicisation programme (translation of all educational books into Amharic) during the Dergue (Haile-Michael 1993). But this did not last long due to lack of resources and a reluctance to accept the programme by various stakeholders. In Africa, it seems that we are not yet ready politically as well as economically to totally replace English as the language of education at secondary and tertiary levels.

The origin of the perception that English (in ESL/EFL contexts) is an obstruction rather than a facilitator of learning (Stoddart 1986) is the poor teaching methodology that pervades education systems (Haile-Michael 1993, Negash 2005). There are instances (for example, Ethiopia and Zambia) that show that citizens or children are not taught properly to develop communicative competence. Williams (2011) cites teacher-dominated classroom interaction which focuses on rote learning instead of meaning comprehension; this leads to lack of competence in English. The national education policy document for Ethiopia (FDRE 2002) expresses a similar kind of dissatisfaction with English language teaching methodology which does not help students achieve a meaningful or working level of proficiency even after many years of formal schooling.

To manage Africa's multilingualism and to use English effectively, it is wise to consider Batibo's proposal for a balanced or hierarchical approach to language use optimisation:

*At the top level we would have the ex-colonial or global language, which would serve as the external window of the country linking it with the outside world in international communication and diplomacy. At the second level, we would have the nationally dominant lingua franca ... as ... both the main official language and the national language ... The third level is that of the major areally dominant or provincial languages which would be used for provincial communication, particularly in primary education and localised mass media. (Batibo 2007:21-22)*

## The future of English in Africa

In his forward to Graddol's 2006 book, Neil Kinnock, a retired UK politician, made the following prediction about the future of English in the world:

*The growth of the use of English as the world's primary language for international communication has obviously been continuing for several decades. But even as the number of English speakers expands further there are signs that the global predominance of the language may fade within the foreseeable future. (Kinnock 2006:3)*

English is not the only foreign language in Africa; governments have to share their budgets between the teaching of English, indigenous languages and other foreign languages. English therefore is competing for resources and status with indigenous languages (estimated at 1,000) and foreign languages such as Portuguese, still used in several African countries, and Italian, which has a relatively minor role in Eritrea (Hailemariam et al. 2011, Chapter 11 this volume) and Ethiopia. A language of major importance in certain parts of Africa is Arabic, which came to Africa in the first century AD with the migration of the Arabs and then again a few centuries

later with the spread of Islam and the introduction of Quranic schools (Abdelali El Quadhiri 2003).

Though not so dominant as English, French is also a European language which competes with it in Africa. It is used as an official language in the former French colonies in West Africa (e.g. Benin, Niger, Sénégal) and North Africa (e.g. Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia). It is one of the AU's working languages, in parallel with English, Arabic and Portuguese. An interesting phenomenon identified by Martin Plout, BBC Africa Analyst, is that just as French speakers in the Francophone countries of Africa are keen to learn English so that they can communicate with their English-speaking neighbours, so some traditionally Anglophone countries are starting to show interest in learning another European language for international communication:

*Ghana recently decided that its officials should learn French, so that they could hold their own with their West African colleagues from Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Sénégal. So although Paris will not be pleased by the Rwandan decision [to use English as a medium of instruction], their language is by no means about to be extinguished from the African continent. (Plout 2008)*

The rising eastern economies like China and India, with their pragmatic philosophy of non-interference in the politics of their African partners, are challenging the economic dominance of the West. This new economic and political dominance might also lead to new linguistic and cultural influences on Africa. This will certainly be the case if China decides to maintain or expand still further its investment in the promotion of its language and culture in the same way that the Anglophone countries have been doing for many years. As in other parts of the world, including Europe, China is launching Confucius Institutes which offer free Chinese language instruction; there are already said to be 20 in different parts of Africa. Perhaps African governments want to ease the pressure which the West puts on them to introduce political reform as a precondition for aid by developing new partnerships with China. For example, in 2009 Zimbabwe instructed its universities to begin teaching Chinese history, culture and language (Mandarin) (Magaisa 2009). Meanwhile, different sources indicate that the Chinese government is financing regular conferences in African universities (see Simons 2009 and Mvogo 2010) and offering scholarships to Africans.

Even individual Chinese observers recognise that their government has adopted an aggressive policy towards Africa. I recall personal communication with postgraduate students from China whom I met in the USA while visiting the University of Michigan in the summer of 2010. These students told me repeatedly how friendly China is towards Africa. They asked me:

*Is there any Chinese language teaching or Confucius Institute in your country? Our country uses Confucius institutions to teach Chinese way of life and create peaceful relations with countries. (Field note/UM/ELI/August 2010)*

It is interesting to observe how much effort China is putting into promoting the learning of Mandarin in Africa while at the same time investing so much to help its own citizens learn English. Magaisa (2009) remarks, however, that Chinese project

workers in Africa (specifically Zimbabwe) tend not to put too much effort into learning African languages to communicate with the people they are supervising. This leads Magaisa to wonder, therefore, whether the energetic promotion of Chinese language and culture in Africa might be 'quite simply one language of power (Mandarin) being given space to dislodge another (English).'

My own belief is that English is and will continue to be an effective common language in Africa–China interaction and that Mandarin will not replace English as the dominant international language in Africa. This is because the Chinese themselves are learning English in order to spread their influence (see also Bruthiaux 2002). Evidence of this can be seen in the communication between Chinese supervisors and African construction workers. I was curious about how the Chinese supervisors communicate with labourers in Africa and so I talked to some of the latter:

*We use 'broken English', just simple words like Stop! No! ... with gestures. And sometimes we use translation from English to Amharic.*  
**(Talk with Ethiopian, December 2010)**

My own and other survey studies indicate, therefore, that despite challenges from other languages English will remain the most popular or desired language in Africa. My own interview survey carried out on an ongoing basis since 2006 has involved 126 Africans of diverse careers from various countries; they include language experts, teachers, students, drivers and hotel workers, chosen randomly. The interview questions included 'How do you see the importance of English for Africa and your country's development?' and 'How do you see the role of English in your career advancement?' As Graddol (2007) has noted elsewhere, the respondents overwhelmingly talk of 'globalisation' as an explanation for the prominence of English in the continent. Many teachers I met in Burkina Faso and Sénégal in West Africa told me that individuals of their acquaintance who were educated in other foreign languages, such as French, Spanish or Portuguese, were taking private tuition in English. A group of Burkina English language inspectors described the situation in their country as follows:

*Although French is the official language, we need English to do business with non-French speakers. In Ouagadougou we have about five English language centres. One of these is the American Centre. There are also other English language centres run by Burkinas as well.* **(Interview/CS/October 2010)**

Many Ethiopians I talked to (teachers, students, experts in different fields) have a very positive attitude towards English. One of the reasons for this is that English is associated with modernisation and development. Although many teachers and students feel that they have still not mastered English, they believe that the driving force behind the growing importance of English is economic and political interdependence. Here is the view of a statistics lecturer that can represent the opinion of a majority of educated Ethiopians:

*English is a de facto international language for Africa. Because of the globalisation level in trade, politics, learning we need English, we can't stay isolated. In the past, other European countries like France, Austria, Germany insisted on using their*

own language in business, education. But these days, they have become bilingual, they use English to publish and to teach, because they want to reach the world citizens. Although sometimes culturally unacceptable things can be sent through the internet, 90 per cent of resources we get in Africa or Ethiopia come from the West and this is almost all in English. Even people from Francophone countries need English to access these resources.

**(Interview with LMD/September 2010)**

Contrary to the above perception, however, there are some experts and teachers of different subjects who may feel that the use of a foreign language like English is rather an obstruction to learning (Stoddart 1986). The following comment sums up the pain which many Africans using English as a second or foreign language have experienced:

*We are confused in Ethiopia; we don't learn English and use English properly and at the same time we have it as a medium of instruction and a second official language. Sometimes I feel very frustrated, we don't use it as well as other Africans. (Interview with MDS/December 2010)*

Another academic, however, expressed his opinion that, despite the importance of English, he is dissatisfied with the general level of proficiency in the language:

These days the level of English language has deteriorated, but this shouldn't be an excuse for wanting to resort to using local language for education. You know we tried this during the socialist regime, translate words into Amharic, but that didn't succeed. So we have to find a way of teaching the students better English. (Interview with LSE/December 2010)

And so, unlike the language specialists, many ordinary Africans believe that the problem with English language proficiency is not a reason for replacing it with indigenous African languages. In fact, there are some who believe that they communicate quite adequately in English:

*I personally don't feel any obstacle in career development because of English; I would say I communicate easily in English especially with what I am doing now, reading, writing and teaching (Interview/TG/December 2010)*

My survey results are supported by a similar study conducted in another African country, Sudan, which compared the relative importance of English, Arabic and the first language. The study concluded:

*English is important as an international language; it facilitates contact with foreigners ... (they) speak Arabic mainly for instrumental and pragmatic reasons such as in formal domains, at the workplace, in education and so on ... they liked to maintain their L1 for integrative or ideological/symbolic reasons as part of their heritage and as a cultural symbol. (Idris et al. 2007:42)*

Apart from the public interest, governments in Africa also place a high value on English. For instance, Ivory Coast and Ethiopia are currently spending money on national curriculum revisions and the preparation of new teaching materials based on recent language teaching methodologies. In Ethiopia, the present government

has invested a greater amount of money than its predecessors in English language improvement projects for English and other subject teachers (Siraj et al. 2007).

Recently, Rwanda has switched from French to English as a language of post-primary education. Although there seems to be political motivation behind the change, I believe that a major factor is the continued dominance of English as the language of wider international communication in Africa and beyond. Plout has observed:

*Conversations in the capital, Kigali, are increasingly conducted in English. A colleague who recently visited the country reported being given a brisk brush-off for asking for information in French. And the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology has for some time used English as the official medium of instruction.*  
**(Plout 2008)**

Organisations like the British Council, the Hornby Trust and USAID are also investing in English language provision, teacher training and the production of resource materials. In Francophone West Africa (and Portuguese-speaking Cape Verde), there is some significant work in progress co-ordinated and supported by the Hornby Trust and the British Council. Since 2009 the Trust and the British Council have conducted four Hornby Schools in Sénégal and Burkina Faso to train teacher trainers and teachers. A training and methodology resource book (Tennant and Negash 2009) has been published. And an ongoing discussion with senior stakeholders responsible for English and others in these countries aims 'to get better understanding of how an organisation like the British Council ... could best engage with policy makers, teachers and learners' (Tennant and Negash 2010:1).

## Conclusion

Although it is often argued that English is the language of the African elite, it actually has many roles in development in Africa, the effects of which can trickle down to the masses. With good language planning, English is going to be the major international language for some time to come, which will help Africa and Africans to get connected within and beyond their national and regional boundaries.

However, since development is increasingly associated with using the L1 as a language of education, there seems to be an unhelpful labelling of foreign languages like English as languages of imperialism (Phillipson 1996). This ignores the pragmatic, sociolinguistic, economic and political realities in Africa and beyond. If an L1 is used ineffectively this cannot be blamed entirely on the dominance of foreign languages; there have also been failures in the management of multilingualism, in the teaching of the mother tongues and in the teaching methods adopted for ESL and EFL. The negative associations attached to English may also have arisen from the use of an inappropriate teaching approach and materials that give the impression that the culture of native speakers of English is in some way superior to the cultures of the countries where English is taught and used as a second or foreign language (Canagarajah 1999).

It is definitely unhelpful for Africa to continue viewing English or any other international language as the language of colonisation or imperialism. Africans

need to go beyond this and see the usefulness of English without it dominating or deterring the development of our indigenous cultures and languages.

What Africa needs is an optimisation (Batibo 2007) of linguistic resources (including national, local and international languages), in the continent as a whole and in each individual country. This requires an effective language policy to manage multilingualism and the competition for resources and status between the indigenous languages themselves and between English and the indigenous languages or other international languages. There also needs to be some solid research on Africans' perceptions of the value of English, so that the debate on language planning can move beyond the whim of the elites.

English is going to be even more important as Africa, its member states and its citizens engage with the rest of the world more meaningfully. As governments and people become more confident to have their say in global economic, social and political matters, the demand for English will increase.

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